2: Krige and Krige E-5 (1928-1939)1943
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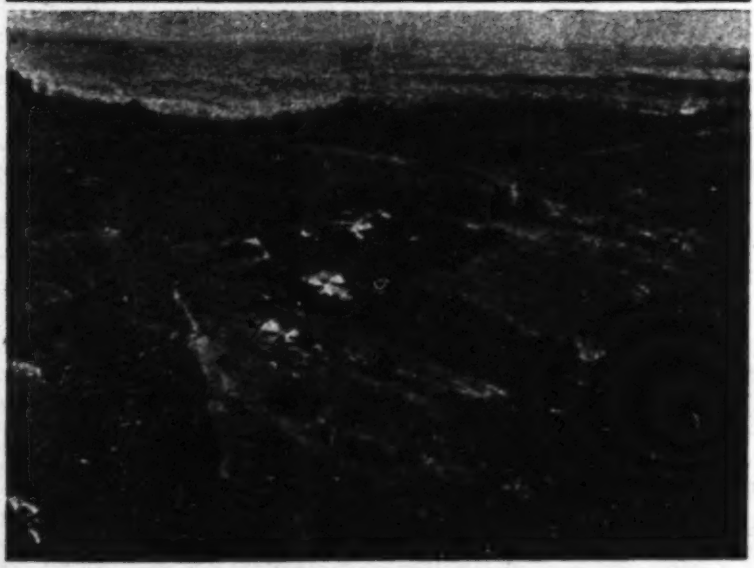

133
361

I. THE LOVEDU LANDSCAPE

(*a*) THE HILL OF CYCADS

(*b*) FIELDS AND VILLAGES ON THE FOOTHILLS

[facing p. 16]

133
361
487
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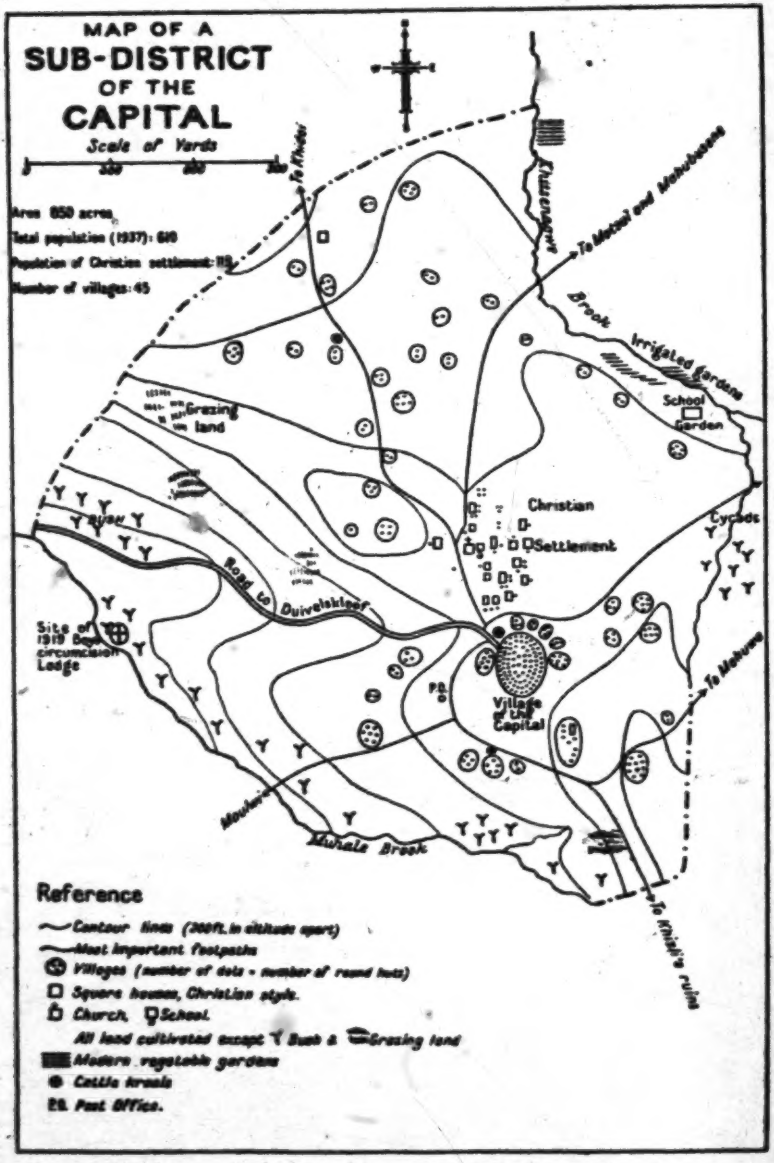

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2: Krige and Krige E-5 (1928-1939)1943
FX14 Lovedu FX14

CHAPTER II

A PICTURE OF EVERYDAY THINGS

A visitor's impressions of the manners and interests of the people—a glimpse of a village and its huts, of the preparation of food and etiquette in eating, and of the decorum of drinking beer—the evening scene, with its hearth fires, riddles, and stories—the seasonal calendar of activities.

As you drive along the winding road on a visit to Mujaji's reserve, you find yourself in a narrow valley between the two ranges of Vulovedu mountains, where flows the Mulodozi River, fed by countless streams from the bush-covered slopes above. It is the month of March. The mealies in the fields, visible on all sides through the bushy vegetation, stand dark green and high, appearing to grow right to the very doorsteps of the villages you pass. At first and to the untrained eye the country seems relatively empty, so well do the dwellings merge into the general view. On looking more closely, however, you see cluster after cluster of conical, thatched roofs peeping out from the bush on the hillsides, some of them perched on ledges like eagles' eyries. For the reserve is in reality very thickly populated. The villages are small, five to fifteen huts being the average size; a few large villages of from forty to eighty huts represent the old order of things, just as those of only two huts do the new. But the Lovedu village was never very large and never could compare, either in size or arrangement, with the great towns of the Tswana and of some Sotho.

As you go down a steep dip to cross a stream, a sullen-looking woman balancing a wide-mouthed basket on her head, her legs heavy with leg rings which reach almost up to the knee, suspiciously turns her back on you. She wears a cloth of red salampore behind and before, knotted on the shoulders; while from her neck dangles the ubiquitous snuff box on a necklet of plaited string, black with dirt, but holding three or four treasured heirlooms, large deep-blue or white beads and perhaps some small blue, red, and yellow ones of the kind that were brought from Rhodesia long before the European had come. A little further on you hear a shout, '*Makhuwa, Makhuwa*' (Europeans, Europeans), as a group of herdboys runs towards the road. The younger ones among them, mere toddlers playing outside their village, scurry away crying to their mothers, and scatter the chickens from the ash-heap as they do so. A herdboy, wearing nothing but his loin covering and an old tattered coat which was once his father's, shouts 'More Baas,' European words he has picked up from his elders; but the rest run joyfully after the car, rending the air with their shrieks.

The road begins to ascend steeply up the hill to the capital, but here, if you wish to visit headman Raselaka, you must get out and walk. As you go in single file along the narrow footpath, bounded on either side by creeper-covered bush or long grass higher than your shoulders, you become aware of a strong smell somewhat reminiscent of turpentine. In a few moments you discover its cause—the ripening fruits of the

2: Krige and Krige E-5 (1928-1939)1943
FX14 Lovedu FX14

methods of various doctors are not the same. Sometimes a goat is killed and very often one finds at the entrance to a village a stick, 3–4 ft. long, on which are the roots of a *titigwani* lily (*Hypoxis villosa*) or pieces of skin of the goat that was killed. This 'medicine of the village', some of which is always kept by the owner, is important for curing certain illnesses caused by witches and may be eaten with the firstfruits. Every year the village needs to be 'awakened' (*hu dzosa mutse*) by the renewal of these protective medicines, a process which Rapaka carries out naked at dead of night by sprinkling round the hedge certain medicine, an ingredient of which is river or sea sand. The river sand has the property of making the village appear as an expanse of water before the eyes of the sorcerer, who thereupon concludes that he has come to the wrong place. A village may have no visible hedge, but the invisible, charmed enclosure is never absent.

On passing through the gate you find yourself in the *khɔrɔ*, an open space, in which there is a hearth. Hardly have you seated yourself on one of the sprawling, spider-like stools of forked branches that are ranged around it than Raselaka himself, who has been expecting you, comes forward. He sits down and, inclining his body to the left, claps his hands, saying, '*Ndau dona*' ('Male lion'). He asks after your health, politely inquires about the journey, and pleasantries are exchanged. According to strict etiquette, he ought to have taken his visitors straight to the chief hut, where guests are received, but he knows you wish to be shown over the village, and perhaps that is why he lingers with you in the *khɔrɔ*. A woman passes, bends both knees in a curtsy and inclines the head, passing one palm slowly over the other, a manner of greeting usual to women; then goes slowly on her way. Soon afterwards, you are overpowered by a most offensive smell. You turn round and discover that she has opened up a grain pit, from the roomy interior of which a small boy, who has let himself in through the narrow neck, is handing out dishfuls of brownish-coloured mealies. Dampness has entered and spoilt the mealies, but the process has not gone far enough to make them uneatable. They are called *maduni* and, though the smell may be unpleasant, there are many who, at least as a change of diet, prefer food made of them to that of ordinary mealies. Many people are already inquiring whether the owner is willing to exchange them. Dotted about the *khɔrɔ* are other pits which can be located by means of a stick, for each is covered with a large, flat stone sealed down with mud. The *khɔrɔ* is the place where the men and boys of the village sit, and where cases may be heard; but it is also the playground of the children. Often when children worry their mothers by shouting or playing in the courtyards, they are told, 'Run away and play in the *khɔrɔ*; this is not your playground.' Many villages to-day have no *khɔrɔ*; they are too small to need one or, where there is a much-neglected space for it, it is not used at all, especially when the men are away at work in town.

To the left of the *khɔrɔ* are a small cattle kraal with wire fence, an enclosure for goats, and another with a roof for donkeys. Only a few villages have cattle at all; but, for most of those that have, a kraal outside the village made of rough poles serves now that there is no longer any

2: Krige and Krige E-5 (1928-1939)1943
FX14 Lovedu FX14

fear of preying animals or raiding enemies. Old Raselaka complains that herdboys of to-day no longer tend cattle as they should. Cattle used to be taken to graze just after sunrise, at least when there was no summer dew, for the early dew in summer, though not in winter, is dangerous to man and beast. They were brought home to be milked at about 11 o'clock, when the boys would eat their breakfast, and were driven out again till sunset. To-day the boys like having their breakfast first, and it is not unusual in some areas to find cattle still in their kraals at midday, especially where the herdboys are attending school, a practice that seriously decreases their grazing time. Not one of the ten head of cattle in Raselaka's village is in milk. In fact, the cattle in Loveduland give hardly any milk at all, owing largely to over-population (over 75 per cent. of the land is under cultivation and certain areas are under forest) but also because of the poor quality of the cattle. But milk has never played an important part in Lovedu diet and many people find it nauseating.

You are eager to be shown the lay-out of the village and to watch some of the activities. As you pass through a gateway leading from the *khɔrɔ* to the huts, you hear Raselaka giving orders to the boys that a fowl is to be caught and killed for the visitors. The huts stand in two curved rows facing one another, sixteen in all. In a large old-style village like the royal kraal, they would surround the *khɔrɔ*, but here there are too few for that. A complete circle of huts still haunts the dreams of the ambitious doyen of a district. To one side of the line of huts is a tobacco garden, while at the back is the *marala*, or storage enclosure, made of branches with a gate that can be closed against wandering goats. Here stand the large receptacles made of wood interwoven with grass in which mealies are stored after reaping, till dry enough for decobbing. But they are empty now and some are in need of repair. To one side stands a roughly made, unplastered hut full of beer-pots. Here beer is left to ferment and sometimes also served. A number of large green and yellow pumpkins, the sweet kind cultivated by Natives, have been placed beside the beer-pots, while a heap of golden, plumlike *morula* fruits with a cloud of midges above it testifies to the desire of some woman to make a little cider at home. But it is seldom that such cider is made at home; the place for it is in the open under the shade of the trees.

As you look along the space between the two rows of huts, a pleasant and busy scene meets the eyes. It is ten o'clock and cooking operations are at their height. Some are cooking outside in the courtyard; others prefer to cook in the kitchen hut. An old woman is spreading out her newly lifted monkey nuts, together with a few cobs of mealies which had fallen to the ground, to be sun-dried in her courtyard. Some freshly stamped mealie meal on mats and in baskets is also set out in the sun. On an old piece of corrugated iron are lumps of a dark green substance. This is relish, cooked pumpkin and bean leaves, being dried and preserved for use in winter, when greens are hard to obtain. Apparently too much had been cooked for the corrugated iron, so the residue has been plastered on to the thatch of a hut. Roofs are useful also for other purposes; on one is a newly washed salampore cloth spread out to dry.

Each pair of opposing huts forms a separate household, its courtyard,

3: Krige E-5 (1928-1938)1938 FX14 Lovedu FX14

one might call the Lobedu culture complex, though it is not at all clear what the origin of its differentiating features is. In its most typical form this culture is found among the Lobedu of Modjadji, the Letswalo and the Khaha. To the north-west it merges into the not very different Venda culture complex; to the south, Pedi influences, noticeable on the edge of the Drakensberg, become increasingly apparent among the Mahlo and eventually predominate among the Baha Mamidja on the banks of the Olifants. In the east, the Phalaborwa have developed specialized responses to the challenge of an arid bushveld environment; while to the west along the escarpment, Tokwa influences are so marked that the Sekhopo branch of the Lobedu, who live there, differ more from the Lobedu of Modjadji than do the unrelated Khaha and Letswalo.[1] These gradations are to some extent hidden by the fact that owing to the mixed composition of every tribe differences in custom in any single tribe are often as great as differences from one tribe to another. The nature of this Lowveld cultural pattern, those features peculiar to this area and those held in common with other tribes, will best be shown by a short account in general terms of various aspects of the social and economic organization of these tribes.

General Aspects of the Lowveld Village. The Lowveld village, nestling among the trees and shrubs of the surrounding bushveld vegetation, which usually provides a natural fence, differs in general aspect from that of the Highveld tribes with its well-smeared, high-walled courtyards. While there is a tendency in the south, among Narene of Segororo and to a lesser extent among Thabina and Maake's Khaha, for villages to straggle in lines along the hill-sides, there is nowhere any sign of the large agglomerations of dwellings so typical of the Tswana town and present in an attenuated form also among Tokwa of the Highveld. The Lowveld village is not large, consisting generally of from two to twenty huts; but there is evidence that when times were more unsettled and the need for protection kept

[1] The Birwa who live partly in the Lowveld, partly in the Highveld, probably belong to the Lobedu culture complex. Though their culture differs in many respects from that of the Lowveld tribes there are also marked similarities, such as ritual suicide of the chief.

3: Krige E-5 (1928-1938)1938 FX14 Lovedu FX14

in effective check the tendency for people to move away after every quarrel or accusation of witchcraft, villages were not only appreciably larger than to-day but also somewhat differently arranged, with both courtyard and cattle-kraal in the centre. Wherever possible the Sotho build on mountains, which are covered with a rich, loamy soil well suited to cultivation, are less fever-ridden than the valleys, and in the old days afforded better protection against enemies. Indeed, it is not until recent times that the valleys have been opened up even for agriculture. Within the village each married woman generally has two huts, kitchen- and sleeping-hut, while one or more fenced-in sections near the hedge are devoted to the storage of mealies on the cob and beer-making activities.

TRIBAL ECONOMY. The tribes of the Lowveld are predominantly agricultural, possessing on the whole few cattle. Milk, which many adults find nauseating, plays a very minor part in their diet, milk taboos are unknown while the meat sacrifice is rare, beer taking its place. As among Venda and the Sotho of the Highveld, women are not as strictly excluded from contact with cattle as among the Nguni; not only is it common for girls to herd cattle in the absence of boys in town or at the circumcision school, but many women also possess cattle in their own right. While it would be impossible here to give a full account of Lowveld agriculture, it is of interest to enumerate some of its more salient aspects. Men take a considerable part in agricultural activities, every married man having one large field for which he is responsible. But while women plant every kind of crop, men grow and reap only mealies, grain crops, and sugar-cane; pumpkins, beans, ground- and monkey-nuts, &c., are considered as purely a woman's concern. In our area, as elsewhere, these crops are mostly planted together in the same field, mealies predominating in some parts, kaffir-corn or millet being the chief crop in others. Partly as a result of congestion and partly in order to take advantage of differential climatic conditions as between mountain and valley, fields of any one family are generally very widely scattered, being sometimes as much as ten miles apart. Recognition of the food value of various wild fruit trees, such as the morula and wild fig, is shown by the fines attached to cutting them without special permission. An interesting feature